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Carol X Weakley 10/06/2006 02:52:09 PM From DB/Inbox: Carol X Weakley

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 TEL AVIV 003952

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [KPAL](#) [PHUM](#) [IS](#) [LE](#) [KWBG](#) [PREF](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: PRM PDAS GREENE MEETINGS WITH ISRAELI AND NGO
OFFICIALS

REF: A: SEPTEMBER 30 PRM E-MAIL REPORT ON PDAS MEETINGS

Classified By: Classified by Political Counselor Marc Sievers. Reason
1.4 (B/D)

¶1. (C) Summary: On September 28-29, PRM PDAS Richard Greene had wide-ranging discussions with GOI and International Organization (IO) officials pertaining to: access barriers facing IOs and NGOs implementing humanitarian programs in the West Bank and Gaza; coordination efforts between the GOI and ICRC during the Lebanon war; ICRC policies and procedures to ensure that USG contributions do not benefit Hizballah and Hamas; ICRC efforts to obtain "proof of life" for the three Israeli soldiers held by Hizballah and Hamas; and progress on implementation of the first Memorandum of Understanding between Magen David Adom (MDA) and the Palestinian Red Crescent Society (PRCS). In meetings with GOI officials, PDAS Greene emphasized that implementing tangible improvements on humanitarian access issues will help bolster the international community's commitment to deliver humanitarian assistance to the Palestinian population. Israeli MFA Deputy Director General (DDG) for International Organizations Roni Ya'ar stressed that the Israeli government is working at the highest levels to develop an access strategy in anticipation of the Secretary's October 4-5 visit.

ICRC ON HUMANITARIAN OPS AND PRISONER ACCESS
IN LEBANON AND GAZA CONFLICTS

¶2. (C) Dominik Stillhart, Head of Delegation for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) office that covers Israel, the West Bank and Gaza complimented ICRC-GOI

coordination during last summer's conflict in Lebanon "from a purely technical point of view," but he indicated that there is room for future improvement. Stillhart noted that the ICRC and IDF had established a coordination mechanism five days into the fighting, a distinct improvement over past conflicts during which the IDF reportedly told ICRC to "wait until the war is over." He characterized the functioning of that center as "close to exemplary," but registered concern that the IDF did not give sufficient weight to humanitarian concerns, citing tensions caused by the IDF's request that all humanitarian actors work via the ICRC early during the war, and numerous IDF decisions to deny ICRC and UN vehicles access to vulnerable populations in southern Lebanon during the height of the conflict. For illustrative purposes, Stillhart revealed two instances in which he had received calls from the IDF, one claiming they had aerial photos of an ICRC office in Tyre that showed Hizballah operatives on the roof of an ICRC building, and another in which the IDF claimed that Lebanese Red Crescent convoys were being used for movement by Hizballah and thus justified the IDF's directive that any ICRC vehicle moving without coordination would be considered a military target. Stillhart interpreted these calls as "deliberate signals from the IDF that it had the power to effectively shut down ICRC operations at any time if it pressed too hard for access." (Stillhart noted that ICRC's Lebanon delegation controlled the entire building it occupied in Tyre and thoroughly searched not only its own roof but all neighboring buildings.) Stillhart did not mention any occasions on which the IDF actually fired on ICRC locations, vehicles, or personnel.

13. (C) Finally, Stillhart expressed concern about the purported number of cluster bombs dropped by the IDF in Lebanon during the last 48 hours of the fighting and what he described as the GOI's subsequent failure to provide any response to ICRC's request for information on the number of POWs or captured civilians who remain in GOI custody. Stillhart explained that multiple ICRC interventions have so far failed to elicit clarification as to whether the GOI considers the detainees POWs, or will grant the ICRC access in the near future. Stillhart expressed frustration at this approach, explaining that the Israelis have, in the past, generally been responsive to similar inquiries. Stillhart speculated that this is an internal political decision, perhaps due to the fact that the GOI is under public pressure to appear tough. To help address these concerns, Stillhart intimated that he is personally pressing his HQ to break with longstanding ICRC practice and share the post-war assessment ICRC usually compiles on the conduct of combatants with "both sides." He was doubtful, however, that such a controversial request would be approved by Geneva.

GAZA

14. (C) Turning to Gaza, Stillhart echoed the same concerns that UNRWA and UNSCO officials expressed (ref. a) that new but unspecified Israeli security procedures are hindering their ability to effectively implement U.S.-funded humanitarian assistance programs in the West Bank and Gaza. Closures of borders and checkpoints into and out of the West Bank and Gaza have been frequent and sustained. Stillhart also reiterated an oft-heard UN concern that international humanitarian staff are subjected to vehicle checks out of the line-of-sight of ICRC and UN officials, explaining that the humanitarian community fears that a rogue individual (such as one of the private contractors that now have responsibility for managing the Erez and Allenby checkpoints) could plant items such as weapons that could be discovered at a later checkpoint. Such an incident could result in a total closure of ICRC operations. Stillhart urged Greene to deliver the message that the GOI should view the ICRC as a willing security partner, not as the enemy, as both entities are pursuing the same goals -- delivery of humanitarian assistance to vulnerable Palestinians with zero tolerance for direct or indirect benefit to terrorist organizations. In response to PDAS Greene's questions about ICRC's policies and

procedures to ensure that USG assistance does not benefit Hamas or Hizballah, Stillhart assured Greene that the ICRC has adequate mechanisms in place to prevent this, including controlling the disbursement of assets directly to beneficiaries (as opposed to through intermediaries with potentially suspect ties) through small regional sub-delegation offices that also facilitate close monitoring of locally-hired ICRC staff.

CROSSINGS: KARNI AND RAFAH

15. (C) Asked about the most important thing the GOI could do for humanitarian access, Stillhart emphasized the importance of implementing policies and procedures to sustain the consistent flow of goods and workers through Karni and Rafah crossings. He said that businesses have been destroyed by the closures and that frustration has reached alarming levels in Gaza. Stillhart also pointed out that the various elements of the Israeli security apparatus have responsibility for authorizing movement through checkpoints currently lack clear guidance on central government decisions to support ICRC and the UN's right to operate unimpeded in the West Bank and Gaza.

16. (C) Echoing a concern that UNRWA ComGen Karen Abu Zayd expressed in a statement to her Advisory Commission in Amman (septel), Stillhart also pointed to a recent uptick in settler violence against Palestinians in the northern West Bank. He criticized what he called "the double standard of law enforcement" by Israeli authorities turning a blind eye to settler violence. Stillhart said that this violence has turned large areas into what are essentially "no go zones" for the Palestinians, and cautioned that allowing this situation to continue is not in long-term Israeli interests.

ICRC TO TURN TO DAMASCUS AGAIN IN SEARCH OF SIGNS OF LIFE

17. (C) Regarding ICRC's ongoing efforts to obtain "signs of life" for the three Israeli soldiers abducted by Hamas and Hizballah, Stillhart said that despite repeated requests for information, both Hamas and Hizballah have made it clear that no "signs of life" are likely to be offered in the absence of concessions on the part of the Israelis. Stillhart said that Hamas was "essentially telling us that everything has a price, including passing a message." Despite a frustrating lack of progress, ICRC will continue to intervene with both Hamas and Hizballah on behalf of the abducted soldiers, adding that ICRC officials in Gaza have exhausted all known factions and now plan to meet again soon with Hamas' external leader Khaled Meshal in Damascus.

RED CROSS MOVEMENT: STATUS OF NEW NATIONAL SOCIETY
COOPERATIVE AGREEMENT

18. (C) PDAS Greene also reviewed access arrangements and other issues that affect the effective implementation of the MOU between Magen David Adom (MDA) and the Palestinian Red Crescent Society (PRCS) -- that helped secure their admission earlier this year as fully fledged members of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement -- with the heads of both national societies. Dr. Noam Yifrach, chairman of MDA, spoke of generally good cooperation with the Palestinian Red Crescent organization. He attributed a renewed debate on territoriality to PRCS President Khatib's decision to nominate a former senior Palestinian Foreign Ministry official as his deputy. Palestinian authorities had requested that MDA not operate in the West Bank and Gaza and that they should close their stations in those areas. (NOTE: PRCS President Khatib has described the situation as tantamount to PRCS operating permanent stations in Tel Aviv or the American Red Cross taking over EMS services for the U.S. military in Afghanistan or Iraq. END NOTE.) Yifrach

asked rhetorically who would take MDA's place. He said the Israeli military had no staff for this, would be too slow, and would not be accepted by the Palestinians. Noting that MDA now has 12,000 volunteers, Yifrach said that only his organization could do the job. He said that he offered to ask the Palestinian authorities for permission to enter the West Bank and Gaza, but was told by PRCS President Khatib "don't ask" because of fears it could subject Khatib to renewed threats against his life for having entered into an agreement with MDA. If this impasse cannot be solved, Yifrach said that he would transfer MDA ambulances in the West Bank to local communities, as they had done in the Golan Heights.

¶9. (C) Both Yifrach and PRCS president Younis Khatib raised issues relating to elements of the agreements between the two national societies that have not yet been fully implemented including:

- a lack of GOI response to a PRCS request for clearance for a small number of ambulances and drivers to operate in Jerusalem;

- GOI permission for the PRCS to utilize Palestinian license plates on its ambulances;

- the issue of low-level IDF staff at checkpoints determining whether PRCS ambulances carrying Palestinian patients to hospitals in Jerusalem are in fact critical medical cases.

Yifrach and Khatib relayed wholly different interpretations of recent discussions centered on establishing a PRCS-run clinic at the Allenby bridge crossing, with Yifrach relaying that the Israeli authorities at the bridge have accepted this proposal, and Khatib stating that the proposal had been rejected by the same authorities. PDAS Greene promised to raise these issues with GOI interlocutors (see below).

IDF AND MFA ON ACCESS

¶10. (C) Brigadier General (ret.) Baruch Spiegel, who will retire in mid-October as Special Adviser to the Minister of Defense, said that he found the humanitarian agencies' continued access problems "embarrassing." He commented that the MOD is looking favorably at Ambassador Jones' proposal for reviving the Agreement on Movement and Access (AMA). He also expressed optimism about the reopening of Rafah crossing in the near future, but cautioned that, due to ongoing security threats, the GOI must proceed cautiously and take all necessary measures to mitigate such threats. Spiegel argued that Egypt must play an active role monitoring Gaza's borders, especially preventing Hamas from transporting large quantities of cash via Rafah terminal.

¶11. (C) Spiegel called the Karni proposal by U.S. Security Coordinator LTG Dayton "interesting and important as a model of bottom-up efforts to improve the existing security structure," but questioned its viability without support from Palestinian Authority President Abbas, explaining that Abbas currently has neither the infrastructure nor the resources to support the plan. Spiegel stressed that the Palestinians "have to do it." He said that Abbas must show "immediate performance" and better control of the crossing, but that systematic governmental corruption on the Palestinian side and internal power struggles are preventing progress. Without this fundamental cooperation, Spiegel predicted that the Dayton plan would go the way of Erez Crossing, where the GOI had spent significant resources to upgrade security to support Palestinian day laborers entering Israel but which is rarely in use. Nonetheless, Spiegel noted that the IDF was committed to improving security to ensure humanitarian access, noting that the Ministry of Defense had used internal resources to purchase new scanners at Karni. Spiegel was pleased to report that the volume of trucks into and out of Gaza through Karni had been at peak levels during the

previous week, but acknowledged that access for humanitarian goods through Karni has been inconsistent throughout the past several months.

¶12. (C) Turning to specific ICRC and UN complaints that their operations are being negatively affected by officials at Erez who they claim are no longer abiding by the GOI's April 11 circular outlining security procedures at that crossing point, Spiegel called the situation in Gaza "very bad," and commented that there is always a conflict between security and humanitarian needs. He noted that the security threats from tunneling are very real but are very difficult to detect given the fact that sonar cannot work in Gaza's sandy soil. Tunnel detection requires extensive digging, resulting in prolonged closures of access points. Nonetheless, Spiegel suggested that much can be done to improve humanitarian access before a final political agreement is reached and that Israel should continue to take interim steps to ensure the situation in Gaza does not continue to deteriorate. In response to PDAS Greene's question as to what concrete measures can be implemented to demonstrate that the GOI takes seriously humanitarian access issues, Spiegel agreed to meet with a senior UN official to discuss a list of specific incidents impacting international staff member's ability to operate in the West Bank and Gaza.

¶13. (C) Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Deputy Director General for International Organizations (A/S equivalent) Roni Ya'ar defended Israeli security actions as necessary and dismissed the complaints raised by the UN and ICRC as trivial. When pressed, Ya'ar agreed that it was not in Israel's interest for Gaza to implode, and revealed that his government had convened a series of meetings, at the highest levels, to develop an access strategy in anticipation of the Secretary's October 4-5 visit. Ya'ar also noted that FM

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Livni had recently appointed an MFA point person for the UN who will work on access issues and that she had already sought a meeting with Deputy UNSCO Kevin Kennedy. Ya'ar also indicated that the GOI is undertaking a serious review of Jan Egeland's recent "Proposal to Improve Access and Movement to and from Gaza." Asked about MFA efforts to ensure real MDA-PRCS operational coordination on the ground, Ya'ar stated his government's clear opposition to a Swiss proposal to send a delegation to oversee MDA-PRCS implementation and suggested that PRCS's new Deputy President, a former Palestinian MFA official, was pursuing a politicized agenda on territorial access issues, adding that MDA President Noam Yifrach was "not as politically astute." Despite these reservations, Ya'ar offered to invite PRCS president Khatib to a meeting to discuss PRCS concerns about GOI positions that are delaying implementation of its MOU with MDA.

PALESTINIAN REFUGEES FROM IRAQ

¶14. (C) Ya'ar declared that Livni is interested in the matter of Palestinian refugees, and has instructed Ya'ar and others within the MFA to focus on this issue. He indicated that Livni will have strongly held views on the Palestinian refugee issue and revealed that Livni had recently rejected a request from UNHCR to allow Palestinians who had fled Baghdad and who are currently stuck on the Iraq-Syria border (after being refused entry by Syria) to transit Israel and take up residence in the West Bank out of concern that it would set a precedent. To mitigate the GOI position, Livni had instructed Ya'ar to find a mechanism to "do something for the Palestinian refugees in Iraq." Ya'ar suggested that he might seek the Canadian Government's support to convene a "no name" Refugee Working Group meeting to help develop a strategy, arguing that the "trick" would be getting the Palestinians to approve a solution that did not involve large-scale return.

¶15. (U) PDAS Greene has cleared this cable.

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